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Officials Say Green Berets Aided In Libyan Terrorist Training Plan

The following article is based on reporting by Jeff Gerth and Philip Taubman and was written by Mr. Taubman.

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 24 — Senior officers of the Army Special Forces permitted one of their noncommissioned officers to recruit a group of former colleagues from America's elite commando troops to train terrorists in Libya four years ago, even though they were not certain at the time whether the operation was sanctioned by the Central Intelligence Agency, according to several Army officials familiar with the events.

The Army later learned, they said, that the operation was not sanctioned by the C.I.A.

"If the operation wasn't run by the United States Government, it should have been," said one former commanding officer in the Special Forces, better known as the Green Berets. He added that some Green Beret officers believed the Libyan operation might produce valuable intelligence.

If the Special Forces commanding officers supported the operation, they acted outside the normal chain of command, because several Army officials said the Defense Department, like the C.I.A., had not authorized it. If they did so, officers at Fort Bragg, N.C., where the Special Forces were based, were probably overstepping their authority.

According to participants in the operation and Federal investigators, at least 10 men trained as Green Berets traveled to Libya in 1977 to help train terrorists in a program managed by Edwin P. Wilson, a former American intelligence agent who was charged last year with illegally exporting explosives to Libya as part of a plan to train terrorists.

One of the participants, Luke F. Thompson, who was a Green Beret master sergeant on active duty in 1977, said last month that military intelligence officials told him the venture was "legal and aboveboard" before he recruited the former Special Forces troops to travel to Libya in late July 1977.

Mr. Thompson, who is now retired, also said in an interview that Special Forces commanding officers had granted him a special leave to participate in the operation. He said it was only after his return from Libya, where he worked for more than a month, that Army officials informed him that the C.I.A. had not formally endorsed the plan. Even then, Mr. Thompson said, Army officials gave him the impression that the C.I.A. might have given tacit approval for the operation.

The question whether the Government, and the C.I.A. in particular, played any official role in Mr. Wilson's Libyan activities is one of the central issues expected to be examined by the House Select Committee on Intelligence when it opens its investigation of the Wilson case. The committee announced last week that it would begin a full-scale investigation later this month.

In 1976, according to Federal investigators, Mr. Wilson, a former covert operative for the C.I.A., closed a business deal with Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, the leader of Libya, to sell his expertise in intelligence and military matters to the militant Arab nation in North Africa for the training of terrorists.

Mr. Wilson and another former C.I.A. agent, Frank E. Terpil, were indicted last year by a Federal grand jury here on charges of illegally shipping explosives to Libya as part of this operation. Both men are fugitives.

Col. Robert A. Mountel, who commanded Sergeant Thompson in 1977, said in an interview that as far as he knew, the involvement of Special Forces in Libya was not authorized by the C.I.A., which often uses Special Forces troops in covert operations.

Colonel Mountel, who is now director of unconventional warfare for the United States Readiness Command based at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, said that in his tenure in the Green Berets, all requests for manpower for C.I.A. operations were passed down through the Army hierarchy, originating with the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington.

erated great concern.

Another Army official familiar with the operation said that Special Forces officers who learned of Sergeant Thompson's activities thought the Libyan operation could be utilized to gather intelligence in a nation where the United States had few, if any, sources of information. This official, who asked not to be quoted by name, said that some informal consideration was given to supporting the operation in hopes that it could eventually be turned into a Government venture.

Leave Granted

Mr. Thompson's account of the Army's attitude toward his activities also suggested that Special Forces officers regarded the Libyan operation with favor. He said his superiors granted his request for a leave, and others told him it was acceptable to recruit former Green Berets, because they appeared to feel the operation might be productive.

The C.I.A. has denied having any official involvement in the terrorist training operation mounted by Mr. Wilson, and an internal agency investigation into his ties to the C.I.A. in 1977 led to the dismissal of two officials who were found to be assisting him, according to senior intelligence officials.

One of the dismissed officials, Patry E. Loomis, initially recruited Sergeant Thompson for the Libyan operation, according to the sergeant and Federal investigators. Some Federal investigators believe that other C.I.A. officials with ties to Mr. Wilson may have given indirect approval for his work in Libya in hopes that the operation might produce important intelligence.

According to Colonel Mountel, Sergeant Thompson's first descriptions of the Libyan operation were "vague." He said that, at first, the sergeant did not say that the work involved Libya.

Advice to Sergeant

"I knew it was something overseas," Colonel Mountel recalled, "so I suggested he talk to military intelligence."

He said he also raised the issue with military intelligence officials at Fort Bragg. "I told Luke to be sure of the legality of the operation," he said.

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